



## *Willfulness and Aspirations for Young Women in Australian High Stakes Curriculum*

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### **Abstract**

*This paper follows recent scholarship in youth studies in suggesting that young people's aspirations for the future are deeply enmeshed within a social, cultural, and economic articulation of what constitutes a "good" life that an individual ought to orient toward. It uses Ahmed's (2014) notion of "wilfulness" to consider how young people anticipate, plan for, and orient toward the future as a real and imagined space that is embedded within their relationship to everyday social, cultural, and economic practices. To do this, I draw upon digital blog and interview narratives collected across a seventeen-month period from three young women in their final year of secondary school in Victoria, Australia. These narratives take up the notion of "willed" space(s) to consider the capacities, energies, and projects that these young women tell about the future over time. Throughout, this paper argues that a willful lens is particularly productive for its capacity to move beyond an understanding of educational participation as a fixed site for realising aspirations to one that highlights multiple processes of becoming within novel spaces of identification and belonging.*

**Keywords:** gender; aspirations; senior secondary; narrative; affect

### **Introduction**

*Y'know me, itching for something more as always. I'm itching to be somewhere doing something deliciously exciting. Something I would never in a million years consider doing. Something terrifying. I want a permanent adrenalin rush. I'm tired and wild and wanting something more. But I'm not quite ready yet. -Laura, Park High, Blog Post: 8 July*

The most common word in Laura's blog throughout the year is "more." For Laura, "more" is articulated both in terms of processes, emotions, and very commonly, in relation to her body. In the opening narrative, she communicates a key quality of her final year of schooling—events unfold less by design than by chance, connected through their sense of "itching," of being "itchy" for the future. As it is for many young women in their final year of secondary schooling in Australia, Laura's narrative is a story of what Ahmed (2014) calls willing or willfulness.

This paper draws out the interplay between the willing and the willed. It follows recent scholarship concerned with questions of aspiration and gender in the sociology of education and critical youth studies (McLeod, 2015; Woodman & Wyn, 2015) to suggest that young women's aspirations for the future are deeply enmeshed within an articulation of what constitutes a "good" life that an individual ought to orient toward. Ahmed's (2014) "willful subject" is deployed here to extend the conversation around aspirations and gender in educational scholarship. It draws upon the digital blog and interview narratives collected across a seventeen-month period from three young women in their final year of secondary school in Victoria, Australia. These narratives take up the notion of "willed" space from three directions: from with-in, with-out, and against notions of gender, participation, and aspiration. Throughout, this paper argues that a willful lens is particularly productive for considering questions of how young people take up multiple processes of identification and belonging within the context of massively increased participation in senior secondary education.

I begin with a sketch of the rapid increase in senior secondary and higher education participation in Australia over the last two decades. I then elaborate Ahmed's (2014) notion of willfulness and explore its potential in considering questions of aspirations and gender in the sociology of education. Data gathering techniques used to collect and analyse the narratives of the young people in this study are outlined. Here, I also provide a snapshot of each of the young women and their participation in the research. The second half of the paper explores the contributions of the three young women, Laura, Candice, and Angela in turn, before considering questions of educational participation, aspiration, and gender within a willful frame.

### **Aspirations in High Stakes Curriculum**

Each of the three young women in this paper emigrated to Australia with their families in the early years of their participation in formal education. Their narratives bring together three important discourses in the sociology of education, where this study is framed: the social, structural, and economic dimensions of young people's aspirations for post-school study and work; second, the paradoxical effects of the rise in educational participation, yet continued stagnation of labour market outcomes for young women in the global north; and finally, the marked increase in hybrid identities and the racialisation of young people from Asian backgrounds in particular in Australian educational discourse. These categories frame the discussion of aspirations and gender that follows.

In Australia, much research into senior secondary education has examined the structural, cultural and political conditions that combine to influence young people's participation in formal educational settings and their transition to post-school work pathways (Morrison, 2010; Sellar, Gale, & Parker, 2011; Walkerdine, 2011). As Keating et al. (2013) show, large-scale shifts in labour market opportunities and credentialism in senior school curriculum means that more young people are orienting toward university pathways without a clear path to articulate into the labour market. In Australia, these experiences are themselves differentiated by factors of class, gender, and ethnicity. For those "in the middle," a complex network of resources, expectations, and familial support helps young people to successfully negotiate senior secondary and further education (Snee & Devine, 2014, p. 3). Whilst these circumstances might help to enable relatively low-risk transitions for many, for those in minoritised positions, these supports also potentially encourage certain kinds of "reasonable and acceptable" aspirations for "people like us" (Snee & Devine 2014, p. 4). As James et al. (2010) note, the aspirations of middle-class young people are often tied to

notions of what is an acceptable minimum achievement—especially regarding pursuing further education and engaging in skilled, usually professional labour. Zipin et al. (2015, p. 228) argue however, that discursive incitements to overcome obstacles through “raising aspirations” actually increase rather than attenuate obstacles by operating ideologically to simplify the complexities’ through which young people imagine and produce themselves and their future lives.

In Australia, McLeod and Yates’ (2006, p. 164) longitudinal study found significant class and gender distinctions both in relation to the “current situation and their prospective future(s)” of young people in metropolitan and regional settings. They note that within “changing meanings of what is powerful and less powerful,” there remains a persistent pattern in the outcomes that young women face, particularly with relation educational experiences and aspirations (2006, p. 225). In response to questions of class and school selection in the UK, Ball (2003) highlights the anxieties, strategies, and techniques employed by both the “middle-class” and those who aspire to it in maintaining social class position in and through formal educational participation. Similarly, Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) argue that traditional notions of what it means to be a working or middle-class are still very much lived and desired by young women amidst changing economic and political conditions.

It is the case in Australia that young women on average outperform young men in senior secondary education, have higher participation rates, and go on to University in greater numbers (Stanwick, Lu, Rittie, & Circelli, 2014). Yet by age twenty-four, only two-thirds of young women are in full-time work or study, compared to eighty percent of young men (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015). In many ways, Year 12 represents a moment of heightened optimism for young women that is simply not maintained once the persistent inequities of the labour market are encountered in the years that follow (Collins, Kenway, & Mcleod, 2000; Connell, 2013). One key suggestion in this literature is that the neoliberal shifts that have accompanied the first decades of the new millennium mean that for young women, going on to tertiary education and to meaningful, full time employment is an expectation rather than a fantasy (McLeod, 2015). Questions of marriage and childbearing for many young women are deferred to the more distant future, “after” establishing a career (Wyn, Cuervo, Crofts, & Woodman, 2017). Within this economic, cultural, and social environment, it is not that “traditions” are dismantled, or no longer desired, it is that fitting them within the conditions of the present and anticipated future requires that they are realised differently. Thomson (2011, p. 177) captures this well in her suggestion that “tradition is a situated concept, implicated in classed, sexualized and racialised cultures.” As I have considered elsewhere, there is evidence to suggest that young women are reflexively “doing” gender in strategic, novel, and traditional ways (Duggan, 2016). These identities are “improvised,” to use Thomson’s (2011, p. 176) term, and they draw upon middle-class resources in the present to make and remake imaginings of the future in productive, and novel ways.

Finally, there is a burgeoning literature about mixed and hybrid racial identities within an Australian context in recent times (Bolatagici, 2004; Matthews, 2007). Bolatagici (2004, p. 78) for example, argues for the creation of a “third space” as a way of opening up the analytical possibility of a “positive transgression that questions and challenges rigid racial categories.” For Neely and Samura (2011, p. 1941), migrant young people’s experiences of education involve “on-going historical, political and dialectical processes between materiality and culture.” This is particularly illustrated in the sustained prevalence of stereotyping around pro-educational orientation of young people of Asian descent, and young Asian women in particular. As Bablak, Raby, and Pomerantz (2016, p. 56) show in a North American context, “minority characterisation” conflates “assumed cultural personality traits, homogenises and excludes, and carries negative repercussions.”

Matthews (2002b, p. 204) extends this, arguing that the “social and spatial separations that emerge from processes of racialisation and sexualisation sustain the formation of Asian...pro-educational orientations that rely on maintaining Asian/Anglo distinctions.” Matthews’ assertion is instructive for this paper, and I return to this in my discussion of Candice—a young woman who migrated from China—and her articulation of aspirations for the future.

The embedding of economic values as a kind of “politics of expectation” has forged a powerful platform of aspiration-focused policy initiatives in secondary and higher education, contributing to what some have termed a “neoliberal imaginary” of social mobility for both young people and their families (Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Rizvi & Lingard, 2011; Sellar, 2013). Within this paradigm, discussions of stress, aspiration, and young people interacting diligently with the “systems” of high stakes curriculum—such as the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), which is the focus of this paper—have increasingly come to be positioned alongside examinations of social and political agendas within senior secondary policy. These issues have been studied at length with an emphasis on multiculturalism (Keddie, 2014; Machart, 2016), educational outcomes (Schnepf, 2007; Sellar et al., 2011), mobility (Rizvi, 2013; Waters & Brooks, 2011), and learner identities (Matthews, 2002b; Modood, 2004). A common concern across these varied approaches and perspectives are the ways in which young people’s movement across national boundaries and time are articulated within and around issues of ethnicity, gender, and class. For example, Machart (2016, p. 60) powerfully reflects on the transcultural experiences of Asian migrants by interrogating the “intercultural... identifying processes whereby individuals adopt strategies in order to negotiate the self in relation to the other.” For Machart (2016), the emphasis on cultural stereotypes privileges particular forms of identification and socialisation, yet operates to close down others. In the narratives of these three young women, these stereotypes serve as powerful identifications to operate within, or resist against in their experience of the VCE.

Two final points regarding the current trend in thinking about young people’s aspirations are worth elaborating here. First, embedded in narratives surrounding the importance of participation in higher education, there exists a set of normative assumptions that assume a particular kind of “youth” subject who must “arrive” successfully at adulthood on the one hand (Kelly, 2006), and define that arrival in terms of an economic “value” on the other (Côté, 2014; Miller & Rose, 2008). The implication of this for market ideology is not only in positioning university entrance as the preferred post-school destination par excellence, but also in privileging a subject who orients toward high-status pathways and universities as key indicators of successful participation in senior secondary and post-school education. Second, an economic focus on aspirations has been shown to refigure inequalities in access to, and support for engaging with post-school education as being a lack of individual capacity, rather than that of the differing resources that are available to young people (for example, Kelly, 2015b; Reay, 2013). As Reay et al. (2001, p. 872) argue, “[b]ehind the very simple idea of a mass system of higher education we have to recognise a very complex institutional hierarchy and the continued reproduction of racialised and classed inequalities.” Similarly, in Australia, te Riele (2012, p. 249) has shown that recent efforts to set targets for increased school completion are superfluous unless efforts are also made to address not only the economic benefits, but also the social and personal ones through an emphasis on the quality of the education that [leads] to achieving the Year 12 or equivalent qualification.

Thus, whilst educational participation is taken as a “rational behavior” in popular discourses, the reality is that for many young people, significant structural and social barriers make participation more, or less valuable. This is particularly important for the young women in this paper, as notions of aspiration “toward what?” form a significant part of the temporal context of

their final year. How particular images of success stick, and become entangled with narratives of possible and probable futures is fundamental to interrogating how discourses of aspiration and optimism circulate in contemporary times. Returning to Zipin et al. (2015), this understanding of aspirations is crucial for rationalizing continued educational participation as a manifest practice for young people. In the next section, I introduce Ahmed's notion of "wilfulness" as a means of accounting for how value sediments and accumulates in, for, and with young people in orienting toward, and planning for the future.

### A Willing Life

In tracing the notion of "willful subject," Ahmed (2014, pp. 94–5) writes "[t]he distinction between good will and ill will, between strong willed and weak willed becomes in very stark terms a social distinction." Throughout the text, she uses the notion of "wilfulness" as a way of accounting for, in her words, "what a subject develops, or must develop, to a greater or lesser extent, over time" (2014, p. 61). Reflecting upon the Grimm fairy-tale of the "willful child" who meets her end for her recalcitrance, Ahmed's analysis draws a portrait of how willfulness is deposited through the many articulations of social, cultural, and civic life; an affective force which conditions and is conditioned by the anticipations and anxieties of being, and becoming a viable subject.

Willfulness has two distinctive qualities that are useful for my analysis in this paper. First, a willful subject, for Ahmed (2014), is one who is framed in terms of a moral character—that of the "strong" vs the "weak" will. As she writes, a strong will "describes the acquisition of form...in pursuit of an end" whereas, a "weak will is one where the nature of the will gets in the way of the achievement of form; a lack of purpose leads to disunity and disintegration" (2014, p. 81). The partitioning of these two forms works on individuals to encourage and code certain 'moral' practices, and to disavow others. It is through this double movement that some individuals can come to be seen as tenacious, ambitious, and gregarious, yet the same actions for others are considered stubborn, aggressive, or brash. For Ahmed (2014, p. 17), the "depositing [of] will is unevenly distributed in the social field," and consequently, "the uneven distribution of the will is how a figure can appear as willful."

The second use of willfulness for this paper concerns what Ahmed terms an "ill-will." That is, the activities of an individual that through their emergence and identification as "ill," become marked for correction. For Ahmed, the marking out of good and ill will is at the heart of the educational project. Following the birth of modern education and its problematic relationship with "straightening out" the will of the child through corporeal punishment, Ahmed finds in the "positive pedagogy" of John Locke an educational project of straightening out; a bringing of certain practices, orientations, and tendencies into the world, and a levelling of others. She notes, "[i]f education is to be woven by one's own influences, then it is also the chance to influence what a child becomes" (2014, p. 69). For this paper, I argue that considering the educational project as a straightening of what is bent is fundamental for thinking the emergence of forms of aspiration, and their embedding in the logic of senior secondary participation. I elaborate further on the gendered dimensions of this 'project' in the substantive sections of this paper.

In an earlier text, Ahmed (2010, p. 129) draws on the colonial writings of James Mill to suggest that education is the necessary production of an "impression" upon the child because they are "impressionable and must learn to receive the right impressions" (my emphasis, 2010, p. 129). In Ahmed's view, "(e)ducation is an arrangement of circumstances in such a way that happiness is the result" (2010, p. 129). Mill's link between "natives" and children is no accident, but reflects

a promotion of Colonial education as the utilitarian promotion of what it means to be “civilised.” This is most recognisable in the context of the “crisis of multiculturalism” where, as Ahmed shows through an analysis of the film *Bend It Like Beckham*, freedom is premised as an act of happiness, to be free “from family or tradition but also freedom to identify with the nation as the bearer of the promise of happiness.” Attaining a sense of freedom means acquiring ‘capacities, energies, and projects’ (2010, p. 137). These categories are instructive, as I will discuss in the narratives that follow.

Within the willful lens employed in this paper, this analysis is informed by an understanding of identities as a “sense of self” within which, multiple subjectivities can be read as constituted and constitutive, temporally located, and constantly emerging. This provides a powerful analytic for considering how young people “go with” or resist against dominant frames of reference for who they ought to “be” or become. Importantly, it also encourages consideration of how those qualities are applied projectively or retroactively in the stories that people tell. In the next section, I briefly outline the data gathering and analytic techniques for this study before moving into a substantive consideration of the narratives of these three young women.

### **Data Gathering Techniques**

This paper draws on narratives from a qualitative longitudinal narrative study of thirteen young people engaged in their senior year at three government secondary schools in Melbourne, Australia. The research archive constituted blog posts, two individual interviews of one hour each, and two focus group sessions at each of the three research sites conducted between February 2012 and July 2013. The semi-structured interview questions sought to elicit descriptive accounts (What does a typical day where you attend school look like?), invited the young people to reflect on their educational participation (Are there any things you think make it easier or harder to stay involved in your studies this year?), and asked participants to consider the future beyond school (When you think about next year, what does your life look like? What sorts of activities would you like to be doing?). In each interaction, I was careful not to position university as a “rational behaviour” or to implicitly suggest a hierarchy of post-school outcomes.

The unique blend of data gathering techniques employed in this study gleaned an average of 40 researcher-participant interactions for each individual across the seventeen-month period. In this paper, I focus on the narratives of three of the young women in the study attending Park High, a small co-educational government school in the inner urban areas of Melbourne. The table below provides a snapshot of each participant (next page):

Name	Gender identity	Migrated to Australia	Place of birth	Language spoken at home	Year 12 Subject selection	Post-school aspiration (from Interview 1)	2013 activity
Candice	Female	13	China	Mandarin	English Literature English Legal Studies History: Revolutions Political Studies Psychology (2011)	High-status University: Law or Arts	High-status University in Melbourne: Arts
Angela	Female	2	Korea	English	English Psychology Studio Art History: Revolutions Drama	University: Identified high-status & local	High-status University: Arts offer - Deferred
Laura	Female	10	New Zealand	English	English Studio Art Legal Studies Drama VET: Media	"Lay Low"	Travel/work (No university application made)

The study sought to examine young people's experience of their final year of schooling and movement to their immediate post-school life. Given the nature of the proceeding analysis, it is worth elaborating on the project in some detail here. The study was designed to capture a diverse array of stories, and as such, participants were included regardless of their intended post-school destination. For this reason, the study focused on the experiences of young people engaged in their final year of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), the dominant post-compulsory pathway for young people in Victoria. In line with many recent studies of young people in Australia and indeed further abroad, participants overwhelmingly identified university as their preferred post-school destination. The VCE is a two-year programme (Years 11 and 12—typically 16-18 year olds). In calculating a final ranking for a student, scores from up to seven subjects are scaled each year to account for their relative difficulty. At the end of their final year, students receive an Australian Tertiary Admissions Ranking (ATAR), which is used as the primary means by which universities offer federally subsidised places to their courses. Students enter preferences for up to twelve different courses across multiple institutions, with applications handled centrally in each state and territory by a Tertiary Admissions Centre.

The structure of the VCE means that subject selection, assessment, and ordering "preferences" for tertiary study are strategic tasks for young people in their final years of secondary school (Duggan 2016). In this, schools have been shown to play an important and active role in directing students toward particular kinds of pathways (Teese & Polesel, 2003). As Teese and Polesel (2003) show in their extensive study of VCE subject selection, access to high-status subjects and tertiary preparatory programmes are not equally available to all young people. For Teese and Polesel, socioeconomic advantage plays a large role in mediating the quality, and the quantity of young people's experience of the senior years.

One of the methodological goals of this project was to show the utility of a-synchronous online blogs maintained by participants over an extended period—in this case, the final year of schooling—as a means of "capturing" the self-in-process. This strategy has the potential to contribute to the growing scholarly interest in autobiographical narratives and prolonged engagement with research participants. Whilst these interests have been pursued through different traditions elsewhere, they reflect broad recognition of how narratives offer 'rich insights into how lives, images, and stories are intertwined in multifarious and complex ways' (Tamboukou, 2015, p. 62).

An emphasis on “making” narratives as a form of telling, interpreting, and producing stories highlights the communicative practices through which function and purpose are made intelligible. The power of this is two-fold. Firstly, it gives a basis for examining what Clough (2002, p. 14) defines as “the need [for a story] to be told,” and secondly, it allows for recognition of how this “need” might change over time, both for individuals, and across groups or generations. For an exploration of the will, and how it is ‘done’ in young people’s engagement with education and notions of the future, the notion of “need—the story that itches—is a powerful analytic.

### **Willing the Future to Come**

Unlike many other young people in the study, Laura’s narratives rarely mentioned, or showed much concern for successfully completing her VCE studies. A young Maori woman who emigrated from New Zealand at age 10, she regularly pit the value of schooling against social activities and desiring significant change in her life. Late in the year she disengaged from her blog with the declaration: “I’m sick of over analysing my life on this thing” and a few days later, began deleting several earlier contributions. To return to the narrative that opened this paper, the internal battle between her contested “characters” and the promise of finding and being “found” dominate Laura’s narrative. Her desire to engage in activities she “would never in a million years consider doing” is suggestive of unfolding and restlessness—a subjectivity in which there is no essential “I,” but rather contested selves which surface, unfurl, and are played off against other possibilities. Butler’s suggestion that individuals perform their subjectivity into being actively is useful here, highlighting the importance of choosing which categories to reify and which to resist. Laura’s narrative suggests a complex contingent arrangement of multiple subject positions and resources, for example in her displacement of the VCE from its normative cultural position. Speaking of her day-to-day life, she suggests:

I still do a lot of things, just not things that my teachers would necessarily approve of I guess. I’m a promoter on Thursday nights which pays pretty well. It’s at this, uhh, I guess you’d say fetish club in the city...so I get to do some pretty awesome dressing up. Crystal, my friend, works there too. Good fun stuff. (Laura, Park High, Interview: 14 August)

Engaging in activities that her teachers might not ‘approve’ of seems to crystallise the dichotomy of life versus school for Laura. It is significant that she mentions her teachers here, rather than her mother, who the school has ‘given up’ calling regarding her absence. In one interview Laura explained that her mother takes the side of ‘life’ and school is an unsympathetic, and relatively cold apparatus. ‘Life’ takes the form of a willful articulation of desire that exceeds the boundaries, real and imagined, of the school hall. I asked Laura what drew her to the role as a promoter:

[laughs]...I don’t want to tell you some of it, but it’s mostly dressing up and wandering around. It doesn’t embarrass me to say that. I think a lot of people like that I look a bit Maori, too, so I get a lot of tips. Just having a good time, and making sure everyone else does too. (Laura, Park High, Interview: 14 August)

As Ahmed (2014, pp.80-81) writes, “the will becomes what is required to resist the things that are around us, which seduce us in their proximity, so that we aim for something that is not



yet.” Promoting at the fetish club, seen as an act of will, captures an energy that exceeds the normative relation of a young women to her final years of school—it carries a cost that is both symbolic and embodied. Ahmed (2010, p. 137) notes, “(t)o become an individual is to assume an image: becoming free to be happy turns the body in a certain direction.” In Laura’s narrative, her body, and specifically her Maori body, produce her success in the spaces of the fetish club. The “dressing up” implies a difference in how bodies are regarded—and how Laura is required to act.

In our final interview, which she attended “because Vicki (Pastoral Coordinator) was insistent that [she] come,” Laura flicked through vocational college brochures before casting them aside, suggesting “I’m sure I’ll do something once I figure it out.” Figuring out, though, is a continuously project, made and remade in each of Laura’s narratives. What emerges is an image of the future that does not rely on participation in formal schooling as a central indicator of success. Reengaging one last time with the blog some months after the end of her studies, Laura reflects:

I'll be fine. I'll figure it out my way. I'm not disappointed...Year 12 is a fucking shitfight. It is stupid: the year I want to discover what all this is for and instead here I am belting my head against a wall...I'm pretty happy. I partied hard and did it my own way. I never went home because I had a SAC. I turned up to my Drama exam hung-over. (Laura, Park High, Exit Questions: 15 January, 2013)

On one level, we might read Laura’s detachment from school as a form of what are commonly characterized as risk-taking behaviours (consuming alcohol, drug taking, body modification, and the implication of sexual activity). Indeed, as Youdell (2006) writes, the rise in neo-liberal reforms in educational policy inscribe some young people as “in” and others as “out,” based upon social, and cultural, as well as gender and class inequalities. Exclusion from educational institutions is written on bodies unevenly, and many of the practices Laura describes above “mark” her as a problematic student. A willful reading, however, allows us to see Laura’s progressive uncoupling from the institutional narrative of success and engagement in her final year studies as “bound up with a project [that] reaches for an end” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 61). This operates in two directions at once: First, Laura’s disengagement can be seen as a failure of the will—a reflection that “the will can be stronger and weaker...such that the state of the will becomes the truest measure of the state of the person” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 61). Yet, Laura’s willing disengagement is what Ahmed (2014, p. 134) terms a “charge against”: one that Laura, “charged with willfulness...[can]...accept and mobilize.” Returning to the Grimm narrative that opens her text, Ahmed (2014, p. 136) suggests that the charge of willfulness—to mobilize it in her own orientation—is “the judgement of the rod as an illegitimate ruler” (emphasis in original). For Laura, the VCE and its implication of orienting toward tertiary study are illegitimate; they do not define what it is for her to be in and for the future.

Laura continues to complete the minimum number of tasks, receiving her certificate:

...It [having completed the VCE] feels liberating. It feels like people might stop asking about it one day. It feels like I might be able to just work and be myself...Most important to me is to trust myself to know what's best. It's to surround myself with people who get ME rather

than try to fit me into a box and a course description. (Laura, Park High, Exit Questions: 15 January, 2013)

Key to Laura's narratives across the second half of 2012 is the suggestion that she will one day be able to define herself outside of the terms of university enrolment. She will figure "it" out wherever "it" may reveal itself—a meaningful pathway that allows her to be a willful agent of her own "making." Unlike the other participants in the study, Laura actively rejected the idea of "the university student" as synonymous with "the VCE student" and decouples notions of "aspiration" as "success." With this in mind, I now turn to consider how for Candice, a young woman born in China before emigrating to Australia at the age of seven. In this section, I focus on how Candice embeds her aspirations for a high-status career with the United Nations in her experience of the present, and how these aspirations accumulate in gendered and racialised ways.

### The Willing Present

Candice moved to Park High after transferring from a select entry Government Girls' College at the beginning of her VCE studies. At many points in her interviews she described herself as a "nerd" as well as "so Asian":

I'm Asian here. Because everyone's white and I just bring fried rice every day. But at my old school I was considered "white"...[pause] because, I could not deal with Maths, I just, I hated Maths. I just could not deal with any Asian pop. I hated Asian pop so much! (Candice, Park High, Interview: 23 May)

For Candice, certain practices mark her as "Asian." Conformity to those practices, through bringing certain foods for lunch, enjoying "Asian" music, hardens the categories associated with being of a culture, such that resistance to them is "strange." As Matthews (2002a) argues, "traditional" and "Asian" identifiers are often used as problematic, yet also productive markers by young people, that both elides and reinforces their pejorative uses. They also produce 'sticky' expectations around many everyday practices, such as educational participation, as Candice explains in the same interview: "Yeah, I have that stereotype of that really hard working Asian person, but I'm not doing any of the Asian Five<sup>1</sup>, which is really strange" (Candice, Park High, Interview: 23 May). Matthews (2002b) notes that the use of the term "Asian" in Australia is a homogenous category used to refer to those people from Southeast (primarily Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia), and Northeast Asia (particularly China, Japan, and Korea). Unlike in the United States or Britain, it does not usually refer to those of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Sri Lankan background. For Matthews (2002b, p. 217), racialising discourses "are articulated in various ways by different people—those who reap the privileges of the centre and those who are marginalized by it." For Candice as a young Chinese woman attending first a predominately "Asian" and then later a "white" school, being "white" or "Asian" depends on the practices that she takes up relative to her peers rather than essential qualities of non/whiteness.

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1. I quizzed Candice on the meaning of the term 'Asian Five': to which she responded "*There's Chemistry, Math Methods, another Maths, Physics, then Bio or, no, English. It's English because you're forced to do English.*" Anecdotally, Asian learners primarily take up these subjects since they have less analytical, interpretive, or language-based tasks, paired with favourable scaling in the calculation of a student's final ATAR.

Recognition of the difference in the identity markers that migrant young people perform in different contexts is well rehearsed in the literature (Francis & Archer, 2005; Matthews, 2007; Phoenix, 2009). The bracketing of this “difference” has both moral and affective dimensions. For the former, Candice’s “being Asian” is something she simultaneously takes up and disavows depending on her circumstances. “Being Asian” is a moral justification for engaging in certain practices such as “bringing fried rice everyday” yet it also requires resistance of other supposed identifiers, such as in not enjoying mathematics and science. Rattansi and Phoenix (2005, p. 105) suggest that recent emphasis on “the possibility of multiple positionings allows scope for understanding the creative ‘hybridisation’ of identities whereby young people in particular are able to borrow...elements from a range of ethnic and gender identities.” This is particularly true, for Rattansi and Phoenix (2005, p. 105), in the articulation of “the tensions, anxieties and crises generated when attempts are made to cross cultural and identificatory boundaries.” In this sense, Candice’s bracketing of “Asian” habits, practices, and dispositions in her narratives from “White” ones serves an important purpose in traversing the perceived divide between dominant imaginings of those cultures. Here, Ahmed (2010, p. 141) is instructive in her suggestion that “(m)embership in an affective community can require not only that you share an orientation toward certain objects as being good...but also that you recognize the same objects as being lost.”

Candice’s work ethic and active study practices speak powerfully to what Thomson (2011, p. 48) describes in her longitudinal study of young people as an “educational identity that is self-consciously informed by being a ‘determined’” young woman. Candice’s aspirations are regulated by familial expectation and motivated by her recognition of gender inequality. Early in the year, she highlights the role of gender in her aspirations when speaking of her eventual goal to work for the United Nations:

I don’t really want to go into politics whilst there’s still so much change. I feel bad for Julia Gillard, there’s always hate, there’s always hate about what she wears. No one did that to John Howard or Kevin Rudd,<sup>2</sup> it’s just really cruel. But I also know how important it is to have that political background for the UN. All of the women who work there are so powerful...I wanna be one of them.

(Researcher): That sounds like a rewarding goal. What attracts you to it?

Ummm well it’s, half the time, I see ads for them and I just go “wow, I’m never gonna get there.” Someday. Someday I’m gonna get there. They say that “woman applicants” you know, “are generally put forward.” (Candice, Park High, Interview: 23 May)

For Candice, politics is a space where femininity is a risk, where a “charge against” may be made. The UN on the other hand is not a political space, but is one in which females take up the willful charge and are powerful. For Candice however, the risks of politics are a requirement

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2. In June 2010, Julia Gillard became Australia’s first female Prime Minister replacing Kevin Rudd through a Labor caucus vote. In her time as leader, she faced staunch criticism from the media as well as opposition politicians that on several occasions involved the use of derogatory language attacking her gender and sexuality. This culminated in an address to the Parliament on October 10, 2012 often referred to as “the Misogyny Speech” where Gillard moved to oppose a motion by the then Opposition Leader Tony Abbott. A transcript of that speech can be found here: <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/transcript-of-julia-gillards-speech-20121009-27c36.html>. The speech was reported on widely by media outlets both within Australia and abroad.

for access to the benefits that the UN provides. As Nayak and Kehily (2006, p. 78) highlight, for many young women, “the emphasis upon educational success and a professional career” involves a denial of traditional markers of femininity in an “attempt to clamber up the career ladder and feel justified” in their post-school choices. Candice’s desire to “be one of them” and to “get there” means successfully negotiating both the dominant discourses of neo-liberal individuation, but also the added risks associated with her own femininity. As Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2003) suggest, social mobility and career attainment are an “escape” from the perils of femininity and being “powerless.”

### **Changing the Will**

Whilst Year 12 students do not tend to finish their regular classes until the first weeks of October each year, it is quite common at many secondary schools in Victoria for all the major coursework to be completed by early September. Thus, for the young people in this study, discussions of “the end” of Year 12 were increasingly prevalent from late August onward, as they transitioned from coursework to revision for end-of-year examinations, and even more so once exams began in the last weeks of October. In a series of blog posts between September and November, Angela, a young woman born in Korea who emigrated to Australia as an infant, captures this moment:

It seems that a lot of aspects of my life are a fantasy, something that I want to keep and build upon even though it isn’t real yet. Is that wrong? Though study is my main priority, whether I obey that or not is another thing. But what if on the other side, everything is still the same? (Angela, Park High, Blog Post: September 24)

In the weeks preceding her exams, she describes the “strangeness” of the shift away from feeling institutionally “held”: “It is not just knowing that I have a place to go 5 days a week. I want more in life, not necessarily more but change, which is already upon me. I want to experience in the world” (Angela, Park High, Blog Post: October 22). Later, she elaborates on this whilst waiting for one of her exams to begin:

How can we be expected to focus on exams when we know that at the end of them all of this is over? I’m not worried about them, I’m no A student anyway, but I have this feeling that soon now that I have the taste for change and freedom that what I have now with (sic) no longer be satisfactory. It is a slight unnerving feeling yet at the same I can’t wait to see the result of it. All of this and I’m supposed to sit and wait for this exam? Two more weeks of waiting in line before the bus arrives. (Angela, Park High, Blog Post: November 2)

For Angela, the future happens “out there” as a fiction that can only be engaged with once she has finished “waiting in line before the bus arrives.” Her excitement for the “taste for change and freedom” evokes an image of the future as comprised of both the possibility to “make” herself successfully, whilst also laying out that image as uneven, yet productive. As it is for many young people, on the other side of successful completion of the VCE, the future remains “out there.” A willful reading of how futures are made differentially, particularly for young women acknowledges that “decision[s] made in the present about the future (under the promissory sign ‘we will’) can be

overridden by the momentum of the past” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 145). Here, “momentum” operates powerfully in the present. Ahmed (2014, p. 108) notes,

[i]f it is assumed before our arrival, that we have a certain future in front of us, we might be pushed toward that future...What you are assumed to be for can then become what you are good for, even all that you are good for.

For Angela, the expectations of the schooling system, and their relation to the “future” operate, in the final days of the VCE, as a restraint. She continues:

Only 170 hours and 15 mins until I see my friends again  
Only 10,080 mins before I have a life again  
Only 604,800 seconds and I will be free from all that restrains me now  
I have spent the last 14 years of my life in the school system and now within a week it shall end and be no more. (Angela, Park High, Blog Post: November 16)

Where researchers such as Furlong and Cartmel (2007) suggest that individuals face “fateful moments,” consequential challenges, and take “risks,” others argue that young people are already and always “living through the consequences of decisions, or lack of decisions” (for example Thomson et al., 2002, p. 338). Angela rarely mentioned her Korean heritage, even though she predominately speaks Korean with her parents at home. She recognises her parent’s desire for her to pursue University after school, yet throughout our interviews, she highlighted keeping “options” open and working hard as important orientations to have. In contrast, Candice cites “being Asian” as the reason she must apply for “Law or something like that” at one of a very short list of prestigious Universities. This is not to suggest that Angela’s migrant status has no effect on her day-to-day life, or indeed her orientation toward school, but rather to highlight how these effects, even within the same school and cohort, are articulated differently, or not at all. Indeed, each of these three young women attended focus group sessions where ethnicity and migration were discussed, yet, as Angela and Candice’s narratives show differently, decision-making, change, and consequence are bound within active practices and an identity performance that is always in-between, and exceeding any particular point (Tamboukou, 2011). The stories that Angela, Candice, and Laura tell play an important part in establishing and retaining the meaning of the events and practices that they face in their negotiation of the VCE. As Livholts and Tamboukou (2015, pp. 110–111) usefully suggest, meaning making is produced through “telling a story in the present” that “allows looking at what makes it possible.” In their terms, “the becoming of a subject is thus saturated by paradoxes and anxieties, and displays ethical dilemmas that are embodied and genealogical” (2015, p. 111). Thus, as Thomson et al. (2002, p. 338) argue, “turbulence” and “disorientation” are productive and dynamic in that although they may produce “highly structured and highly predictable” life choices for some young people, the processes by which they arrive at those choices may still be unpredictable and vibrant. These processes are not reducible to grant narratives of gender, racialisation, or class, even though they may be deeply affected by them. Angela perhaps sums this up best when she suggests:

As my schooling life of order, structure and purpose comes to an end, I find myself wanting more to fill the gap...The unknown, the future and the present all have their place in this feeling, yet I have not found my place. (Angela, Park High, Blog Post: October 22)

### A Willful Life

What emerges through the analysis of these narratives is the need to account for the micro-movements and tensions that emerge both in the lives of those whose trajectories that do not fit within the “norm”—broadly defined—as well as in those that reflect more traditional pathways in terms of class, ethnicity, and gender. Woodman and Wyn (2013, p. 264) note that understanding young people's transitions “simply in terms of successful and deviant individual trajectories through study and into the workforce” tends to impoverish discussions around those individual's lives. Personal and social responsibility is an active endeavour which is at least in part facilitated or constrained by this sense of “bound” agency, where the conditions that young people face play a significant role in the non/linearity of their transitions (Roberts, 2013; te Riele, 2006). For Candice and Angela for example, the reification of traditional gendered and cultured ideals within their narratives suggests what I argue is a reproduction of middle-class norms that acknowledge the ways in which they are problematic and contested in their articulation. Candice is acutely aware of how her future aspirations are gendered and racialised, and draws upon the motif of the powerful “do it yourself” woman to actively orient toward them. This echoes McLeod and Yates' (2006, p. 118) analysis of the female participants in their longitudinal study that their “dreams are a conjunction of desires, dynamics, and social and emotional processes that, in contemporary circumstances, may produce new identity outcomes and shifts in gender relations and positioning.” For Candice, the desire to be a powerful subject is, as Thomson (2011, p. 173) puts it, “both consistent and inconsistent with her social location.”

Where traditional approaches to subjectivity might emphasise the cultural and institutional processes through which young people are regarded as “not yet” adult, a focus on willfulness allows us to see how subjectivities themselves are contested spaces that are actively inhabited, and involve a continual becoming. Angela and Laura's stories are performable because of the contested spaces of the “fetish club” or “waiting” in which they are told. Angela's disavowal of “I” in favor of the all-inclusive “you,” as well as Laura's reflected “we” can be understood as dynamic movements between established and novel subject-positions that are actively negotiated in their telling. For Ahmed, willfulness does work on the individual, and is also a “doing” of the subject. This doubling is intentional, and vital for understanding how particular activities, identities, and aspirations come to be considered as “willful,” and others do not. As she notes, it is “the depositing of willfulness in certain places that allows the willful subject to appear as a figure, as someone we recognize, in an instant” (2014, p. 17). In this sense, the willful figure is “sticky,” and returning to the beginning of this paper, Laura's “itching” can be read as a response to what “sticks” and what slides; the moment of friction between what sorts of identities and orientations ought to sit easily, and those which rub, tingle, and affix. Desire, aspirations, and notions of the self do not necessarily produce easy or complete identities, rather, seeking out and maintaining the will is an ongoing practice which involves rehearsal, renegotiation, and continual maintenance in the day-to-day.

There is a substantial body of literature which emphasizes the non-linearity of young people's trajectories from “youth” to adulthood in modern times, particularly challenging the assumptions around independence as an unproblematic and linear process for most young people (for example in a UK context: Brooks 2009; Ball & Olmedo 2013; and in Australia: Woodman & Wyn

2013; Kelly 2015; Wyn et al. 2012). For example, for Candice, the “career” before the “career” creates a space which, rather than recreating the linear transitions model regarding thinking one’s future, instead creates intermediary zones in which aspirations might be generated and realised before “moving on.” The “career” before is not merely qualification for, but rather allows for the possibility to be. Put simply, “career before the career” is a future-making move. Responsibility is doing something meaningful that opens up the prerequisite requirements of “the UN” and allows for the possibility of transcending the gendering impulse of “politics.” On one level, this move is suggestive of what Singh and Doherty (2008, p. 118) argue is the global orientation of “transnational identities,” where many young Asian migrants strategically engage “both within and beyond various capitalist, family and national regimes to pursue ‘transnational imaginaries.’” Thinking more broadly though, rather than considering subjectivities in terms of “compliance” or “resistance” to participation in the VCE, these young women produce an iterative and continuously unfolding response to the question of “who am I” when constructing grand narratives about who they might be permitted to “be,” or how they might “be different.” In short, these are willful narratives that make, and accept a charge of willfulness.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This paper has sought to take up young people’s identity making practices in their own terms, and resist the tendency in youth and policy scholarship to render those spaces as either “normal” or “other.” It has suggested that the embedding of neoliberal discourses of attainment and responsibility within the architecture of school completion policy targets is more than simply an imperative of successive government bodies: it is a lived accumulation of strategies and aspiration that is written upon the desires and bodies of young people as they move within and through it. These spaces, physical, imagined, and projected are thus key sites in which identity making and aspiration is “done,” alongside rather than in place of linear narratives of success, completion, and transition.

The neoliberal shifts that have accompanied the first decades of the new millennium mean that for these young women, going on to tertiary education and to meaningful, full time employment is an expectation rather than a fantasy. Within this economic, cultural, and social moment, it is not that “traditions” are dismantled, or no longer desired, it is that fitting them within the conditions of the present and anticipated future requires that they are realised differently. Throughout this paper, there is evidence to suggest that young women are reflexively “doing” gender and ethnicity in strategic, novel, and traditional ways. For Laura, this means deeply embodied participation in the economy of the fetish club, for Angela, maintaining an “openness” in her future planning, and for Candice, being a powerful woman who “makes it” at the UN. These identities are “improvised,” to use Thomson’s (2011, p. 176) term, and they draw upon multiple articulations of the will to make and remake imaginings of the future in productive, and novel ways.

The affective lens afforded by Ahmed (2014) is useful for examining the practices that young people engage with as they move through an educational landscape that increasingly privileges neo-liberal governance and measurement by foregrounding how self-making practices allow for, or inhibit expressions of aspiration and identity. Incorporating this rich theoretical landscape into the sociology of education has a generative capacity for capturing how young people’s understanding, planning, and articulation of the future “moves.” This “moving” affects both broader imperatives of “becoming someone,” as well as how those movements itch, rub, and shift alongside the more quotidian practices of doing gender and aspiration in the everyday. As I have attempted

to highlight in this paper, this lens has salience for understanding young people's planning for the future that may incorporate, but are not reducible to university entrance, and for those alternative aspirations which emphasise global mobility and non-traditional pathways.

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